

MISCELLANEOUS NOTES

1. INSTANCES OF FRUIT BAT MOBBING THE BARN OWL

On the night of September 16, 1997, my family and I were watching the total lunar eclipse from our terrace garden at Sion, Mumbai. A pair of barn owls (*Tyto alba*), which were nesting in the rafters of the building next to our house, had the habit of perching on a tree opposite our house. The canopy of the tree was at eye level from our terrace garden on the 3rd floor. Fruit bats or Indian flying foxes (*Pteropus giganteus*) regularly fly all around the area, coming in large numbers mainly from their huge roosting sites at Five Gardens, Dadar, Mumbai.

As we watched, a bat started mobbing one of the owls perched on the topmost branch. The owl immediately ducked and turned its face nearly upside down to look at the attacker. At the same time its mate, which was sitting on a lower branch, gave a loud squawk of protest. The bat then wheeled around and once again came to mob the first bird which ducked out of danger. The owl refused to fly away or move down to the lower branches. This went on for about 10 minutes wherein 17 attempts were made by the bat, out of which about 12 resulted in contact. At least 5 times the bird was nearly dislodged from its perch. We could clearly see that all the mobbing by the bat was done with its wings. All the time both the birds were calling regularly.

The second bird then took off and sat on an adjacent tree, while the first bird was still perched in its original place. A few minutes after

the second bird left, the bat was joined by three others, and all four started mobbing the first bird. The second bird then started screeching and flew over its mate in an attempt to protect it. The first bird then gathered enough courage to fly off to its roosting place in the rafters of the next building.

It was amazing that, inspite of such continuous mobbing, the owl which was being mobbed rarely flew off, and its only evasive action was to duck. The bird flew away only when its mate came to help, or when the mobbing became unbearable. I am quite sure that both the birds were adults, not a protective parent and its offspring.

It was lovely to see this drama as well as the total lunar eclipse. Instances like these have been regularly sighted by us, at least once a week, even to the date of writing this note.

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2. POSSIBLE OCCURRENCE OF THE LESSER WOOLLY HORSESHOE BAT (*RHINOLOPHUS BEDDOMEI*) IN CHINNAR WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

During a short visit to Chinnar Wildlife Sanctuary, Kerala, in October 1997, some members of my group found a black bat hanging from the doorway of a building at the Chinnar checkpoint one evening. The surrounding habitat included riparian gallery forest and light deciduous forest. Judging from the appearance of its face, the bat appeared to be insectivorous,

equipped with echolocating apparatus. For a microchiropteran, it was a large animal, and appeared black overall. The next morning, it was found roosting alone in a dark corner near the ceiling of the same building.

Using BATS OF THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT by Paul Bates and David Harrison, I tentatively identified the bat as *Rhinolophus beddomei*, the

lesser woolly horseshoe bat, on the basis of its large size, colour, habitat and solitary occurrence.

I had an occasion to visit Chinnar again in June 1998. I found a bat, presumably the same individual, roosting at the same place as it had been doing nine months earlier. Even with a moderately bright torch, no further details could be noted to ascertain its identity. I was, however, able to photograph it using a flash this time.

The photograph strengthens the impression that the bat is indeed a lesser woolly horseshoe bat. The animal is seen to be hanging by one leg, which is a habit characteristic of that species. Further, Dr. Paul Bates, who studied this picture wrote that he thought it was *Rhinolophus beddomei*.

The lesser woolly horseshoe bat is endemic to peninsular India and Sri Lanka. In Kerala, it has hitherto been recorded from Wynaad, Tellicherry, Trichur district and Palghat. This report constitutes a possible new record of a species which has been described as very vulnerable to habitat destruction on account of low density populations and forest dependency.

On a later visit to the same place in February 1999, I could not find any bat.

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3. DEAD SNOW LEOPARD *UNCIA UNCIA* AT YABUK, DONGKUNG (5500M) IN NORTH SIKKIM

Snow leopard *Uncia uncia* is protected in Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 as amended upto 1998. There are almost no recent sight records of this rare big cat from Sikkim, the last being a cub from Sebu La region in Lashar valley, north Sikkim. The male cub 'Shebu' survived for less than a year in captivity in Gangtok in 1993-1994. There has been no study so far on its present status in Sikkim.

On November 18, 1998, a Tibetan grazier or 'dokpa' was attracted by a hovering raven while grazing his yaks at Yabuk (c. 5500m), a rocky place about 2 km above Dongkung, at the foot of Chomiomo peak on the Chho Lhamo Plateau. Upon investigating, he saw what he thought was a sleeping, probably sick, snow leopard in the grass at the base of some large boulders. Sensing something was wrong, he drove away the raven and went closer. He found it was an adult male snow leopard lying dead in sleeping posture. The spot was very isolated and intending to return the next day to collect the specimen to bring down to me in Gangtok, he went back to his camp.

Unfortunately feral dogs discovered the carcass. The next day, most of the softer parts, the internal organs and the ribs had been eaten away. The grazier collected the remains. Almost in the same sleeping posture, most of the carcass except the head and shoulders dried naturally in the cold of this desert area. Six months later, on May 16, 1999, he brought the remains down to Gangtok in a highly decomposed state and deposited them in the Wildlife Circle of the Department of Forests, Environment & Wildlife. The heat accelerated putrefaction and we tried to save the specimen as much as possible by skinning. On examining the jaws of the snow leopard, we saw that the upper left canine was missing, as was one incisor in the upper jaw. The other teeth were also worn out and yellow. The claws were blunt. The front pad in the pug measured 8.5 cm and the hind, 8 cm. The tail measured 92 cm and had a diameter of c. 13 cm. The bones were buried in the ground to remove the tissue. They were later cleaned and measured (Table 1).